

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

060646Z Feb 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000227

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SA/INS, LONDON FOR POL/GURNEY, NSC FOR MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [NE](#)

SUBJECT: NEPALESE STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE
MONARCHY: REPUBLICANISM OR RUSE?

REF: A. A) KATHMANDU 122

[B. B](#)) KATHMANDU 193

Classified By: DCM Robert K. Boggs for reasons 1.5 (b,d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The student wings of several Nepalese political parties continue their seventh week of protests against the King, adding calls for a republic to the near-daily pattern of effigy-burning, traffic disruption, and battles with the police. Student leaders allege that their republican rhetoric has won the movement fresh support from disaffected, apolitical youth--a claim not necessarily borne out by increased turnout on the street. General public opinion, and even the personal views of the student leaders, do not support the calls for a republic; however, the radical rhetoric has definitely drawn greater public attention to the student protest program. While the student groups are trying to portray the protests as a spontaneous movement independent of party leadership and control, it remains clear that the student wings continue to receive political direction as well as financial support from their respective parties' Central Committees. The parties appear to be trying to use their student affiliates as proxies to pressure the Palace into replacing the current government with party leaders. End Summary.

Student Protests Fill Final Week of Semester Break

[1](#)2. (SBU) Protests by the student wings of seven political parties continued on a near-daily basis for a sixth week (which, perhaps not coincidentally, coincide with the six-week semester break for university students), snarling traffic in Kathmandu, Biratnagar, Janakpur, Birgunj, Pokhara and Nepalgunj, and provoking clashes with baton-wielding police. Police and security forces have been instructed to use force to suppress any protest or demonstration that includes anti-monarchical statements. In addition to their rallies, the students have organized general strikes ("bandhs"):

--On January 26, student groups called for a general strike in Pokhara (popular tourist center in central Nepal) to protest the police suppression of a student debate the previous day regarding the relevance of the monarchy.

--On January 29, student groups called a general strike in Lalitpur District (adjacent to Kathmandu) to protest police entering a campus dormitory the previous day to arrest demonstrators.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Most of the protests are estimated to draw a few thousand participants. (Note: When other party members joined the students' protest on January 30, numbers swelled to an estimated 8,000-10,000). Students are routinely detained in the course of such protests--and, just as routinely released within a few hours, according to one of the movement's leaders. A student leader reported to us that those detained are treated courteously while in police custody and that although some of the protesters have sustained minor injuries during clashes with police, none has required long-term medical care.

Republican Rhetoric Draws Attention, Ire

[1](#)4. (SBU) While the students have been able to keep their members on the streets for six weeks, they have been less successful in articulating the aims of their programs. The initial agenda was to press the King to limit himself to the role played by the previous king after 1990 of a constitutional monarch aloof from politics. More recently this has been radically modified to include calls for the abolition of the monarchy (Ref B). When asked to identify the reason for this change, Gagan Thapa, General Secretary of the Nepal Student Union (affiliated with the Nepali Congress

party) claimed it was a spontaneous outburst, asserting that "now the streets are determining the agenda" of the protests, not the political parties. This newly radical rhetoric, whatever its genesis, has helped generate greater public attention to the flagging movement, ensuring it a prominent place in daily headlines and local news broadcasts. Thapa claimed that since adding the anti-monarchical theme, numbers at the rallies have swelled to include politically unaffiliated and disaffected youths. However, despite Thapa's claim that the student protest programs are independent of the political parties, Thapa, when pressed, admitted that the student groups receive financial support from their respective parties and that the parties retain the power to appoint and dismiss student union leadership. Other savvy political observers report that the leaders of the main parties continue to prescribe the rhetoric and tactics of their student wings.

15. (SBU) The students' anti-monarchical rhetoric has captured the attention of the Government of Nepal (GON) and security forces. Security forces, under GON direction, have been ordered to suppress any rally in which participants defame or otherwise question the role of the monarchy. (Note: There is a legal prohibition against criticism of the King). Thus anti-King slogans and banners are a sure-fire way to provoke the police into a baton charge--thereby ensuring sensational photos and sympathetic headlines in the next day's press.

16. (C) It is difficult to fathom, however, whether this new-found antipathy to the monarchy is an indication of actual popular sentiment or political expediency. Thapa's own responses, when questioned about his personal feelings toward the institution, reflected a certain ad hoc ambivalence. The monarchy is primarily important as a counterweight to Indian influence in the country, he said; a Nepal without a king might quickly find itself subsumed by its large neighbor, he speculated. On the other hand, he suggested, the traumatic events of June 2001, when the then-Crown Prince killed the King, the Queen, himself and seven other members of the royal family, have led many Nepalis to ponder a previously inconceivable question: is the monarchy really essential to Nepal's national identity and survival? The question has gained particular currency among members of the younger generation, he claimed, who increasingly believe they owe no loyalty to a system that has failed to provide them sufficient educational and employment prospects for the future. But whatever its provenance, the students--and their elders in the parties' Central Committees--obviously believe the anti-monarchical theme has captured public and Palace attention, and are thus unlikely to tone down their provocative rhetoric. NSU's Thapa pointed out proudly that the numbers of demonstrators had swelled since adopting the anti-king slogans, compared with the anemic turnout attracted to earlier rallies. The student movement "had to do something to break the apathy of the people," Thapa said. Controversial slogans against the king and the press coverage they generate, he indicated, seem to provide the winning formula.

Parties Latch On

17. (SBU) The adult leadership of the five protesting parties, stung by the King's public accusations that they have lost popular support and hoping to capitalize on the attention generated by their surrogate student wings, joined forces with the youth groups on January 30 in a demonstration against the Government (Ref B). In latching on to the students' movement, party leaders have made a perfunctory effort to emphasize they are not calling for an end to the monarchy, but rather for the "reactivation" of constitutional monarchy. In their discussions with us, they attempt to portray the student movement as an irresistible tide that they can do little to stem and that the King would be well advised to heed. Not surprisingly, they suggest the King's immediate compliance with their call for an all-party government and/or revival of Parliament is the best way to turn back this "spontaneous" cry from the streets.

Comment

18. (C) It is likely that many young people do not feel the same reverence for the institution of the monarchy, especially after the grisly, highly publicized events of June 2001, as their elders. It is also likely that many young people feel frustrated by the lack of opportunity available to them and may perceive the protracted political deadlock between the parties and the Palace as partially responsible. That said, it is difficult to determine if impatience with the current situation necessarily translates into a genuine, deep-seated desire for radical change. Despite their claims that "the street" is determining the agenda of their movement, the student leaders' obvious dependence upon their

parent parties for money, appointments, and political legitimacy suggests they are receiving more direction--and approbation--from the senior political leadership than either is willing to acknowledge. Despite their disclaimers, the parties seem perfectly willing to exploit for their own purposes whatever momentum their student wings' movement can generate. Unable to reach an understanding with the King through other means, the parties appear to be tacitly abetting their students' anti-monarchial campaign--while maintaining a facade of deniability--as a cynical ruse to pressure the King. End Comment.
MALINOWSKI